

THE POWER OF IRONY IN CHARLOTTE PERKINS GILMAN'S "THE YELLOW WALLPAPER"

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ABSTRACT

In "The Yellow Wallpaper" Charlotte Perkins Gilman skillfully employs irony to criticize the oppressive treatment of women in the 19th century, especially regarding mental health. Through various forms of irony — situational, dramatic, and verbal — she highlights the devastating outcomes of a medical and societal system that disregards women's experiences. The story serves as a profound exploration of the risks of silencing women's voices and enforcing strict gender roles. By integrating irony throughout the narrative, Gilman not only enhances the reader's connection to the story but also conveys an enduring message about the necessity of autonomy, empathy, and understanding in mental health care.

Keywords: irony, situational irony, dramatic irony, verbal irony.

INTRODUCTION

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" is a masterpiece of early feminist literature, exploring the complex intersection of mental health, gender roles, and the oppressive nature of societal expectations in the 19th century. One of the most striking stylistic devices Gilman employs in the story is irony, which serves to highlight the tragic and often absurd reality of the protagonist's situation. Through various forms of irony — situational, dramatic, verbal, and more — Gilman critiques the treatment of women and the misguided medical practices of her time.

1. Situational Irony: A Cure That Harms

The central irony in "The Yellow Wallpaper" revolves around the "rest cure" prescribed to the unnamed narrator by her husband, John, who is a physician. The treatment involves complete rest, isolation from any intellectual or creative activity, and confinement to a single room. The purpose of this treatment is to alleviate the narrator's "nervous condition," which is likely a form of postpartum depression. However, instead of improving her mental health, the enforced inactivity and isolation exacerbate her condition, leading her to descend into madness. This situational irony is deeply tragic. The very measures taken to restore the narrator's health instead become the catalyst for her psychological breakdown. Gilman uses this irony to critique the misguided and paternalistic medical practices of the time, which often ignored the needs and voices of women, ultimately causing more harm than good.

2. Dramatic Irony: The Reader's Awareness vs. the Characters' Ignorance

Dramatic irony plays a significant role in intensifying the tension and horror in the story. From the beginning, the reader can sense that the narrator's condition is worsening under the imposed "cure." We witness her growing obsession with the yellow wallpaper in her bedroom,

which she initially finds ugly and disturbing. As the story progresses, her fixation deepens, and she begins to perceive patterns and shapes within the wallpaper, eventually believing that there is a woman trapped behind it.

The dramatic irony lies in the fact that the reader is fully aware of the narrator's deteriorating mental state, while the other characters, especially John, remain oblivious. John, who prides himself on his medical knowledge and authority, is confident that his treatment is effective. He dismisses the narrator's concerns and protests as mere symptoms of her illness, never realizing that his prescribed cure is driving her toward insanity. This gap between what the reader knows and what the characters understand underscores the tragedy of the narrator's situation and the broader societal failure to recognize and address women's needs.

3. Verbal Irony: The Narrator's Understatements

Gilman also employs verbal irony through the narrator's own words. The narrator often downplays her suffering, trying to convince herself that her husband and the treatment he prescribes are in her best interest. She makes statements like, "John is so wise, and I'm sure he knows what's best for me," even as the reader can see that John's decisions are misguided and harmful.

These ironic statements serve to highlight the narrator's internal conflict and the societal expectations that compel her to suppress her own judgment in favor of male authority. The verbal irony becomes a tool for Gilman to expose the dangers of silencing women and disregarding their autonomy.

4. Irony of Gender Roles and Authority

Another layer of irony in the story lies in the rigid gender roles and the authority granted to men in both the domestic and medical spheres. John, as both the narrator's husband and her physician, holds absolute power over her, dictating every aspect of her life, from where she sleeps to what she thinks. His authority is unquestioned, and the narrator, despite her growing unease and suffering, feels compelled to trust him.

The irony here is that John's authority, which is supposed to protect and heal, instead isolates and infantilizes the narrator, leaving her vulnerable to the very mental collapse he seeks to prevent. Gilman uses this irony to critique the patriarchal structures that deny women agency and autonomy, ultimately leading to their oppression and harm.

5. The Irony of the Wallpaper Itself

The yellow wallpaper in the narrator's room becomes a powerful symbol of her entrapment and deteriorating mental state. Initially dismissed as an unpleasant but harmless aspect of the room, the wallpaper gradually transforms into the focal point of the narrator's obsession. She perceives movement within its chaotic patterns, eventually convincing herself that a woman is trapped behind it, struggling to break free.

The ultimate irony of the wallpaper is that it represents both the narrator's mental prison and her potential for liberation. As she identifies more with the imagined woman behind the wallpaper, she simultaneously loses her grip on reality and gains a perverse sense of freedom

by tearing down the wallpaper in a final act of defiance. This act symbolizes her rejection of the constraints imposed on her, even as it signals her complete psychological breakdown.

Now we can give some examples in the following paragraphs.

1. The Irony of "Rest Cure". The narrator's husband, John, prescribes her a "rest cure" for her mental illness, confining her to a room and forbidding her from any creative or intellectual activity. The irony here is twofold. First, John, as a physician, is supposed to heal her, but his treatment worsens her mental condition. His insistence on her rest — which is meant to be therapeutic — becomes a form of psychological imprisonment. Instead of recovering, she spirals deeper into madness. This irony critiques the oppressive medical practices of the time, especially toward women.

2. The Irony of the Wallpaper's Pattern. The narrator becomes fixated on the yellow wallpaper in her room, seeing within its patterns a woman trapped behind bars. The wallpaper itself is a symbol of irony. At first, it appears to be simply ugly and chaotic. However, as the narrator's obsession deepens, she interprets the wallpaper as a metaphor for her own confinement. The woman she believes is trapped behind the wallpaper mirrors her own struggle to break free from the constraints of her marriage and society. The irony lies in the fact that her fixation on the wallpaper, which her husband dismisses as trivial, becomes the very thing that exposes the depth of her repression.

3. Dramatic Irony in the Narrator's Perception. Throughout the story, the narrator believes that her husband loves her and is acting in her best interest, even though the reader can see that his actions are controlling and harmful. Dramatic irony plays a significant role in the narrative. While the narrator trusts her husband, the reader can see that his paternalistic attitude is undermining her autonomy. This gap between the narrator's perception and the reader's understanding underscores the gendered power dynamics of the story. John's dismissiveness of her thoughts and emotions reveals the irony of his "love" — it is really control disguised as care.

4. The Irony of John's Collapse. At the climax of the story, the narrator declares her victory over the wallpaper and over her husband, saying "I've got out at last," just as John faints upon seeing her behavior. The ultimate irony occurs when John, who has been the authority figure throughout the story, is rendered powerless in the face of his wife's madness. He faints at the sight of her creeping around the room, while she feels liberated. This ironic reversal of power dynamics highlights the story's feminist themes, as the narrator escapes the mental and emotional confinement imposed by her husband — albeit through madness.

5. The Irony of Writing. The narrator is told not to write as part of her "rest cure," yet her secret journal becomes her only means of self-expression and understanding. The irony here is that writing, which is prohibited by John, becomes her only outlet for self-expression. While the narrator obeys her husband outwardly, she defies him by writing in secret. Her journal is the key to her mental liberation, even as it documents her descent into madness. This highlights the irony of silencing women — their voices and identities emerge even in forbidden spaces.

CONCLUSION

In "The Yellow Wallpaper," Charlotte Perkins Gilman masterfully uses irony to critique the oppressive treatment of women in the 19th century, particularly in the context of mental health. Through situational, dramatic, and verbal irony, she exposes the tragic consequences of a medical system and societal structure that fail to understand or value women's experiences. The story remains a powerful exploration of the dangers of ignoring women's voices and the destructive impact of enforced conformity to rigid gender roles. By weaving irony into the fabric of the narrative, Gilman not only deepens the reader's engagement with the story but also delivers a timeless message about the importance of autonomy, understanding, and empathy in the treatment of mental health.

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